

Irony

Babang, Babang, Babang. There was an inspection imminent. It was time for the American Corrections Association audit. This generally means that paint is slathered on all the walls and bars of the prison. Also, to stun, distract, impress and awe the inspectors, murals are painted wherever a big enough space is found and a ranking officer comes up with an idea. In addition, whatever needs must be labeled, must be labeled, elegantly.

The banging was the noise our Unit Artist cart made as my mentor, co-worker, friend Freddy and myself traipsed around the unit unescorted. We ran all over the unit in a desperate zero-hour attempt to meet every task. The cart was filled with our Craftshop bought equipment and some odds-and-ends the state provided. Since there was so much work to be done, the speed with which we rolled that monstrosity is rare. Most times, a cart of this unabashed audaciousness is rolled in the company of a maintenance officer or security personnel. Since they are paid by the hour, they, as a rule, move very slowly. A cart unescorted (and rolled by two guys who had so much work and such little time to do it) was rolled with a ferocity that shook the unit.

The last six days of audit imminence were murder. Everything became a blur of seals, scrolls, flags, eagles, stars, stencilled letters. Brush-stroke letters, airbrushed details, colors mixed, pictures projected. We painted walls, doors, doorways, door frames, and air vents. We paid homage to Texas Rangers and the words of Dr. George Beto, the Huntsvillian patron saints of criminal justice. We proclaimed the correctional staff the world's most outstanding. Taking snickering solace in the fact that standing out can mean a variety of things, like the button-straining belly on a correctional officer, or a sore thumb.

I do remember one particular detail. My six-feet of exhaustion was precariously balanced on top of our four-and-a-half-foot, wobbly wheeled, metal cart. One hand planted on the wall, an X-acto knife in my pocket and one foot extended for balance, I was painting the words Security and Safety high on the wall, elegantly. An assistant warden chose, at that moment, to not ignore my presence. "It's kind of ironic that your standing like that painting 'Safety'."

"Well, my bald, round, master of extortion, a greater irony is that you can actually identify irony. The true irony is that an organization gets paid to inspect a unit for safety and security and ignores all of its own rules infractions so long as the word Safety and Security are painted on the wall, elegantly." I thought as I nodded half-smiled, finished up and banged my unescorted cart to another part of the unit to get the place inspection ready.

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